

Oklahoma Conference of Churches Theological Statement on Poverty

Biblical Rationale: At the outset of his ministry, Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV).

The gospel stories depict Jesus repeatedly at the side of the outcast—the poor, the lepers, women, tax collectors, prostitutes and foreigners—all those called “sinners.” The one miracle repeated through all four gospels is one of generosity and sharing—the feeding of the multitude—in which Jesus' response to the crowds' need is to tell his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Luke 9:13 NRSV). And while Jesus calls for all to repent, he stands with those on the fringes and those who are oppressed, particularly the ones oppressed economically. He reminds his followers that how they treat these people is the mark of their faith. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40 NRSV).

The early Christian communities clearly understood this to be paramount to Christian practice. James writes, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:15-16 NRSV). They echoed the prophets of Israel who reminded the people that God calls us to justice as fellow members of one family: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6-7 NRSV).

While the call for us to be compassionate is an individual one, the call for justice as echoed by the prophets requires, particularly in our context, the mechanism of government. The view that nations, as well as individuals, will be judged by the way they treat the weakest and most vulnerable among them is deeply embedded in our religious tradition.

Poverty: According to various sources, including the DHS and the US Census Bureau, Oklahoma's poverty rate of 15.7 percent is well above the national average of 13.2 percent. To be considered poor by federal standards, a family of four would have to have an income at or below \$22,050 in 2009. The poverty rate for children in the state is far worse: 22 percent. Approximately a third of Oklahoma's population—1.3 million people—are on food stamps or Medicaid, or both.

While the Oklahoma Conference of Churches acknowledges that personal decisions and behavioral patterns play a role in keeping people gripped by poverty, we do not hold the poor *morally* responsible for their circumstances. Furthermore, we recognize that economic structures and practices create systemic poverty. As a communion of Christians, we realize that we are called to respond to the needs of the poor by the giving of our own resources to help others, *and* by advocating for justice, speaking out for policies which help to provide support and protection for the “least of these.” Therefore we support such policies as: Adequate social security programs, quality public education, affordable good housing, job training and support, meaningful employment opportunities, affordable health care, living wages and equitable taxation.